

The Promises and Perils of Identity Politics

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American Mind



Behind the rhetoric of equality and justice lies an ideology of inequality and scapegoating.

In the beginning, only straight white men were free. And the earth was without social justice; and whiteness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of bigotry reigned. But then MLK said: Let there be equality. And so did Betty Friedan, César Chavez, and Harvey Milk. And there was equality—at least more than before.

So goes the conventional story of [identity politics](#). So is history retold in almost every textbook, museum, and movie today. So we are all taught to look at the world through the lens of race, sex, sexual orientation, and now gender identity. And so we all learn to distinguish the victimized groups who should be honored from the oppressor groups who must perpetually atone for the sins of their forefathers.

There are still, of course, other ways of looking at reality in America today, but none so thoroughly dominates the public square as identity politics. While it has not fully conquered the public's mind, it does reign almost unchallenged among the elites. Politicians, professors, producers, pundits, *Fortune* 500 CEOs, tech gurus, journalists, and the coterie of other famous, credentialed, and successful people who comprise our ruling class all worship at the altar of diversity. Some do so out of sincere conviction, others simply to curry favor with their peers. Whatever the motive, in this Platonic cave, all puppeteers carry statues of oppressed identity groups.

Even though it permeates our public life, identity politics remains a somewhat nebulous and contentious concept. As the editors of [The Nation](#) recently asked, “what the hell does that term even mean?” Indeed, there is no agreed-upon definition of what actually constitutes identity politics, how it should be thought of, and whether it is in fact any different from other types of democratic politics. To further complicate matters, most identitarians—defined simply as those who subscribe to identity politics—do not even use the term “identity politics” to describe themselves. As a result, the term gets tossed around in any number of ways by academics, journalists, and politicians alike.

Many claim that identity politics is just a pejorative way to describe “interest-group

politics pursued by groups with whom you happen not to identify,” as Adam Gopnik wrote in [The New Yorker](#). In this view, what the Jews, the Italians, the Irish, and the Poles did a century ago, women and minorities are now doing.

This account is not convincing insofar as it only does justice to one of the two salient features of identity politics: namely, its focus on identity groups (rather than classes as in traditional progressive politics). But identity politics is not just an Americanized version of tribalism. Straightforward political tribalism does not celebrate victimization. Nor does it deny purported victimizers the right to have their own tribe.

Under the reign of identity politics, by contrast, “it is strategically advantageous to be recognized as disadvantaged and victimized,” James B. Jacobs and Kimberly Potter [remark](#). “The greater a group’s victimization, the stronger its moral claim on the larger society.” To which one must add: The greater a group’s purported privilege and power, the weaker its moral claim and the greater ought to be its self-loathing. In the world of identity politics, it turns out that not all identities are created equal. Certain identities—like white or male—are forced to bear the nation’s sins.

Identity Politics as Oppression Politics

Identity politics thus combines a focus on race, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, and any other number of identitarian categories with a politics of victimization. The key to understanding identity politics is to realize that it is primarily a politics of oppression and victimization rather than identity. This is apparent in the first document to use the term, the 1977 [Combahee River Collective Statement](#). As the black lesbian feminists who drafted it explain: “This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics.”

The cornerstone of the identitarian worldview is the claim that America, contrary to its egalitarian professions of faith, is at its core a supremacist regime that oppresses certain groups. The oppressed groups vary according to the different identitarian movements—black people, women, Hispanics, homosexuals, transsexuals, etc.—although most recognize the oppression of other groups and proclaim solidarity with them. This struggle between the oppressors and those whom they oppress on the basis of their identity is the most fundamental dimension of reality. Oppression of women and minorities, in this view, does not mark a departure from American republican ideals. Rather, it reveals the repressive nature of the regime.

In this sense, Malcolm X represents the beginnings of identity politics in America. In his fiery speeches and interviews, the world is divided between evil whites and their nonwhite victims. Malcolm X [denounces](#) white people—who “are born devils by nature”—for “having oppressed and exploited and enslaved our people here in America.” “Any white man,” he insists, “is against blacks.” By contrast, he sees a natural affinity and solidarity between all nonwhites: “the red, the brown and the yellow are indeed all part of the black nation. Which means that black, brown, red, yellow, all are brothers, all are one family. The white one is a stranger. He’s the odd fellow.” And he uses his hold on power to keep the others down: “That’s what America means: prison.”

Oppression and The Basis of Identity

The primacy of oppression in defining identity accounts for what is surely the least compelling aspect of contemporary identity politics: namely, the artificial nature of its constructed identities. Identitarian identities generally do not align with the actual identities of those on whose behalf they claim to speak.

For example, both black Americans who are descended from slaves and Africans who have immigrated to America are viewed and labelled as African Americans by identitarians. Given the purported systemic nature of white racism, both presumably experience the same oppression and should be expected to unite around that shared experience. And yet the two groups of African Americans have very little in common—to say nothing of the great diversity within each group, in particular the African immigrants. One [study](#) found that only “10 percent of African immigrants and 20 percent of African Americans said they have similar cultures.” The two groups also do not [intermarry](#) at high rates.

A similar analysis could be applied to other identitarian identities, from LGBT to Asian American. It is rather telling that the only people who would label both a Filipino American and a Chinese American “Asian” are identitarian ideologues and actual racists (and the Census Bureau). Identitarians, in effect, look at the world through the eyes of a white racist (or misogynist or homophobe).

Their justification for doing so is of course different, but the end result is the same: People are defined by their looks (or by their sexual preference)—not by their religious faith, beliefs, accomplishments, interests, or cultural traditions. The only glue that binds together the vast, diverse, and at times amorphous identitarian identities is what they are not, rather than what they actually are. All Asians are not white, in the same way that all lesbians, gays, and bisexuals are not heterosexual.

A common enemy ultimately proves to be the real basis of identity politics. And it explains the most disturbing features of identity politics: its open hatred of perceived oppressors, whether they be whites, males, or straights. *The Washington Post*, for example, thought it fit to publish an [op-ed](#) entitled “Why can’t we hate men?” The author’s job title—she is a professor of sociology and director of the Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Program at Northeastern University—leaves little doubt as to where she comes down on the question.

The Demands of Identity Politics

One would think that the peddlers of identity politics would not expect anything from a country as hopelessly bigoted as America. And yet they expect quite a lot. The identitarian condemnation of America is coupled, paradoxically enough and just as problematically, with demands for recognition, special treatment, and active government intervention in the economy and civil society to eliminate disparities.

The first set of demands relate to recognition. The various groups that have been and continue to be oppressed and stigmatized on the basis of their identity must be given their proper due and respect by society at large. Textbooks must be rewritten and history must be taught in such a way as to emphasize their historical achievements. Twitter, Facebook and other social media platforms must actively silence those who engage in hate speech. Eventually, America will have to follow Europe’s lead and criminalize it altogether.

The second set of demands calls on society—usually with the backing of the federal government—to actively intervene on behalf of oppressed identity groups so as to ensure their proportional representation in all realms of life. To achieve diversity, the identitarians tend to challenge the standards by which individuals are selected and promoted. They do so in one of two ways. The first approach calls for selection standards to be relaxed for certain groups so as to increase their likelihood of success. This line of reasoning provides justification for most affirmative-action programs. The second approach, by contrast, attacks the standards of selection themselves. Any policy

is suspect if it has a “disparate impact” on certain groups—even if it is applied equally to all and even if it was adopted without any intention to discriminate.

White Guilt

The whole edifice of identity politics is ultimately propped up by white guilt. Whites, particularly liberal whites, have become quite adept at condemning their own country, their own past, their own civilization, their own religion, their own race, and their own gender. They now agonize endlessly over their purported privileges, white or otherwise. They speak of racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia in the language of original sin. They have imbibed the identitarian critique of America and redefined their identity accordingly.

Writing in *The New York Times Magazine* about “White Debt,” Eula Biss tortures herself over “what is owed—and what can never be repaid—for racial privilege.” Upon reflection, she develops “the uncomfortable suspicion” that her good suburban life is “built on a bedrock of evil.” “For me, whiteness is not an identity but a moral problem,” she ultimately confesses.

Identity politics thus ultimately proves to be a misnomer. Because it is primarily a politics of oppression rather than identity, not all Americans are entitled to an identity of which they can be proud. The identities of those who do not belong to one of the recognized classes of victimized identity groups are recognized only in order to be excoriated.

In a fawning review of Spike Lee’s *BlacKkKlansman*, *The New York Times*’s A. O. Scott [writes](#): “Maybe not everyone who is white is a racist, but racism is what makes us white.” This, he claims, is “a stark and discomfiting truth.” “Black is beautiful” has now given way to “White is ugly.” It is, in fact, nearly impossible to think of a single generalization about white people or males for that matter—no matter how offensive, violent, or untrue—that cannot be made with impunity in the public square.

While such public self-flagellation is not without its pleasures—“Self-denigration,” in Pascal Bruckner’s biting words, “is all too clearly a form of indirect self-glorification”—it is a privilege denied to the majority of Americans whom identity politics puts into an untenable situation. They are not only denied an identity worthy of admiration; they are not even permitted to fall back on patriotism and affirm an American identity, America being a wretched country unworthy of any attachment.

As such, identity politics is bound to generate a backlash. That pushback may take one of two forms: the re-embrace of the patriotic, assimilationist, color-blind creed which promises liberty and justice for all or the rise of white identitarianism. Should the latter ever come to pass, then the identitarians will have actually produced that which they claim to oppose. American politics would be reduced to a struggle for power between various identity groups. The end point of identity politics would thus combine Thrasymachus’ definition of justice in *The Republic* as “the advantage of the stronger” with Polemarchus’s “doing good to friends and harm to enemies”—except that the friend-enemy distinction would be applied to domestic politics.

There is therefore an urgent need to demarcate the boundaries of identity politics and to distinguish it from just attempts by women and minorities to petition their government for a redress of legitimate grievances. The main reason identity politics exerts such powerful pull in America is because it claims to speak—exclusively, one should note—on behalf of those who have been mistreated (to varying degrees) in the past. It appeals to our sense of justice. It suggests that we can either embrace identity politics or remain

callously indifferent to the well-being of fellow citizens who look different than we do.

That, in truth, is a false choice. One can sympathize and feel solidarity with black Americans, women, and any other minorities who are pressing just claims without embracing the poisonous ideology of identity politics. Identity politics should be rejected not because it demands justice for those who have been unjustly treated, but because it poses a threat to republican self-government by corroding patriotic ties, fostering hatred, promoting cultural separatism, and demanding special treatment rather than equality under the law.

This essay is adapted from “[The Promises and Perils of Identity Politics](#),” a report published by the Heritage Foundation.



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